ANNA MARIA PASSASEO

Editor

CURRENT ISSUES IN MORAL MATTERS

A Call for Education

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Bullying as a Moral Issue

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1. Introduction

In ordinary language, the term 'bullying' is mainly used to refer to a generic set of dysfunctional behaviours by certain pupils that disrupt the smooth course of activities carried out in educational contexts, primarily school. Anti-social actions such as vandalism, hooliganism or defiance of adults are also sometimes inappropriately considered forms of bullying.

Psychological and sociological research has restricted the application of the term to a series of aggressive behaviours with precise characteristics linked to the agent's lucid intentionality, temporal dimension and relational dimension[1].

What distinguishes bullying from the set of other violent attitudes that can occur in the life of any human being are three specific peculiarities: intentionality, persistence and power imbalance.

Intentionality indicates the fact that the action is carried out by the bully voluntarily and with the knowledge that his sole purpose is to cause harm to his/her victim.

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[1] Cfr. A. FONZI (a cura di), *Il bullismo in Italia. Il fenomeno delle prepotenze a scuola dal Piemonte alla Sicilia*, Firenze, Giunti, 1997; N. IANNACCONE (a cura di), *Stop al bullismo. Strategie per ridurre i comportamenti aggressivi e passivi a scuola*, Bari, La Meridiana, 2005; E. BUCCOLIERO, M. MAGGI (a cura di), *Il bullismo nella scuola primaria. Manuale teorico-pratico per insegnanti e operatori*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2008.

Persistence indicates that the aggressive behaviour and attitude pursued by the bully against his or her victim is not a one-off or isolated phenomenon but persists and is repeated over time.

Power imbalance characterizes the situation in which the bully and the bullied in general find themselves, indicating the gap that exists in their relationship: it may be a gap determined by different physical strength, or by cultural, social, economic or intellectual differences.

When we use the term aggressive behaviour, we are referring not only to physical aggression, but also to verbal and relational aggression, inflicted either by direct or indirect means.

Direct ways are visible attitudes with which the bully prevails over the other: typical physical phenomena are the use of kicks, shoves, punches, taking possession of personal objects without asking permission. Yet, direct methods also include verbal aggressions used by the bully, such as threats, insults, teasing..

Indirect ways, on the other hand, are hidden, insidious and, consequently, less likely to be detected. Among the most common attitudes are psychological violence, gossip, and the victim's isolation.

The kind of aggression and the choice of using direct or indirect ways varies according to the age and gender of those involved in the phenomenon: observing the behaviour of girls, their way of bullying is an indirect way because they prefer to exclude the victim rather than face her directly. Direct aggression, on the other hand, is typical of the male gender.

This gender difference just mentioned can also be observed in the way the bully reacts to violence: whereas girls tend to get depressed and feel deep sadness, rarely taking an attitude of reaction to abuse, boys, on the other hand, react with anger.

It is therefore interesting to delve into a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

2. Inside Bullying

As known, the characteristics we have just identified mean that in every bullying situation specific social roles are defined.

With reference to the role of a bully, we can distinguish at least four types.

A first type is what the literature defines as "the aggressive or dominant bully": very self-confident, he is the undisputed leader of the group and the most popular. His strength, not only physical but above all psychological, is superior to that of the rest of the group, and this makes him a skilful manipulator, aggressive in all the actions he takes without caring about the consequences his attitudes may have on people.

A second type is recognizable as "the anxious bully-victim": insecure, he does not have high self-esteem, is anxious and does not enjoy popularity in the group. He shows aggression in his attitudes, is a skillful provocateur and generally engages in bullying mainly to draw attention to himself.

A third type can be defined as "the passive or gregarious bully": very insecure, he never takes his own initiatives but backs the group leader in his actions. His interest is predominantly in being part of the group and seeking approval from peers, as his interest is not in subjugating the victim, but in preventing him from becoming a victim in turn.

"The temporary bully" is the fourth typology that research has identified: he only shows his aggression after he has suffered an event that has traumatized him. This becomes the cause of his bullying behaviour, which will only end when he has found a solution to the causes of the traumatic event.

Different types can also be recognized with regard to the role of victim.

The so-called "passive or submissive victims" are weak both physically and psychologically, and extremely insecure. With low self-esteem and a negative opinion of themselves, they tend to exclude themselves and have difficulty fitting in and relating to the peer group. When bullied, they are unable to respond to insults or provocations and react by shutting down or crying, thus making themselves even weaker and more vulnerable in the eyes of the bullies. Very often they believe that the

bullying they suffer is their own fault, thus making themselves resigned to their situation as victims.

On the opposite, the "aggressive or defiant victims" are impulsive and sometimes provoke bullying. They show difficulties in managing their emotions and, although suffer bullying, they react to it but not adequately.

The group also plays a fundamental role within the bullying phenomenon, especially in the relationship it establishes with the bully. The latter, in fact, enjoys the approval and admiration of his peers who, in order to get into his good graces, tend to comply with his requests and imitate his behavioural patterns. The group, for its part, supports the bully in every way, thus activating mutual reinforcement and support.

All these characteristics indicate that bullying cannot simply be counted among the problems involving aggressive or antisocial conduct disorders, since the insensitivity to others' suffering and the inability to empathize with others' states of mind that it presents inevitably involve the moral sphere.

3.Bullying a moral issue?

The above-mentioned characteristics legitimise the qualification of bullying as a moral issue.[2] Albert Bandura's theory of 'moral disengagement' helps to justify and understand this perspective.

In his theory of moral development, morality is a dimension of the person guaranteed by internal controls and self-sanctions that make up each person's conscience: it is these that prevent moral norms from being transgressed:

> In the development of a moral self, individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that are guides and deterrents for conduct. They do things that give them satisfaction and a

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[2] Cfr. S. CARAVITA, G. GINI, *L'(im)moralità del bullismo*, Milano, Unicopli, 2010.

sense of self-worth. They refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such conduct will bring self-condemnation. Moral agency is thus exercised through the constraint of negative self-sanctions for conduct that violates one's moral standards and the support of positive self-sanctions for conduct faithful to personal moral standards. In the face of situational inducements to behave inhumanely, people can choose to behave otherwise by exerting self-influence or learn how to do so. Self-sanctions keep conduct in accordance with internal standards.

The exercise of moral agency has dual aspects – inhibitive and proactive. The inhibitive form is manifested in the ability to refrain from behaving inhumanely. The proactive form, grounded in a humanitarian ethic, is manifested in compassion for the plight of others and efforts to further their well-being, often at personal costs.[3]

There are, however, mechanisms capable of selectively disengaging internal control and self-sanctions by freeing the individual from feelings of self-condemnation and guilt, which are detrimental to self-esteem, when compliance is broken. This process is called *moral disengagement*.

Bandura identifies eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, which can be divided into three sets:

A first set are the mechanisms that act directly on immoral conduct by making it more acceptable. They are:

- *Moral justification*: immoral conduct, through cognitive reconstruction of its meaning, is made acceptable both personally and socially, as it serves other higher moral principles (e.g. 'It is good to use force against those who offend your family');

- *Euphemistic labelling:* the individual disguises the reprehensible action by attributing positive characteristics to it so that it appears better and less serious than it actually is (e.g. 'After all, we were only joking, we were just playing and nothing happened');

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[3] A. BANDURA, *Moral Disengagement. How People Do Harm and Live With Themselves*, New York, Worth Publishers, 2016, pp. 1-2.

- *Palliative comparison*: consists in comparing one's immoral action with a worse one in such a way as to make it appear less unacceptable or even benevolent (e.g. 'It's not bad to insult a comrade since beating him up is worse').

The second set are mechanisms that operate by concealing or distorting the relationship between actions and the effects they cause:

- *Displacement of responsibility*: the responsibility for immoral behaviour is not attributed to the individual who performs it but to external sources (e.g. family or friends, 'If the boys are not well brought up at home, they cannot be reprimanded if they misbehave');

- *Diffusion of responsibility*: this is a mechanism for distributing the responsibility for an immoral action among all members of a group by relieving the burden of personal responsibility (e.g. 'It is not only my fault but also the fault of others!');

- *Distortion of consequences*: the outcomes of a negative action are modified or minimized to make them appear less serious (e.g. 'Teasing doesn't really hurt anyone').

The third and last set are the mechanisms that focus on the recipients of the immoral action.

- *Dehumanisation of the victim:* this leads to devaluing the victim by seeing him/her as someone who is not human and who should therefore not enjoy the same respect (e.g. 'It is right to mistreat someone who behaves like a filthy being');

- *Attribution of blame*: the blame for the negative action is placed on the victim who provoked the negative behaviour of the perpetrator by making the perpetrator not feel guilty (e.g. 'Children who are mistreated usually deserve it').

Manifestations of verbal violence on social networks can find an explanation for their increasing prevalence in moral commitment mechanisms.

As Bandura observes:

> Moral disengagement does not alter moral standards. Rather, it provides the means for those who morally disengage to circumvent moral standards in ways that strip morality from harmful behavior and their responsibility for it. However, in other aspects of their lives, they adhere to their moral standards. It is the selective suspension of morality for

harmful activities that enables people to retain their positive self-regard while doing harm.[4]

Nevertheless, all this constitutes a moral problem because it legitimises the non-recognition of the subjects involved as moral subjects, i.e. 'subjects of value', deserving to affirm their dignity as persons, both as *moral patients* and as *moral agents*.

Identifying bullying as a moral problem means that educational processes can be put in place to prevent and contrast the phenomenon that go beyond mere sanctions, but are aimed at recognizing and protecting the dignity of each individual, acknowledging him or her as a 'subject of value'.

And this goes through an education of the heart, of the mind and of the posture of one's 'being in the world'.

It is interesting to ask: how should educational intervention be structured and designed? A brief survey of the ways in which moral development has so far been interpreted in the pedagogical literature may help to answer this question.

4. *Moral development: the traditional view*

As is well known, Greek philosophy (with the exception of Aristotle) established and handed down the thesis according to which the moral sphere is subordinate to the cognitive sphere, so that the development of morality corresponds with the acquisition of knowledge and, more generally, with the strengthening of the rational faculties.

The famous Socratic thesis according to which 'who does evil does it out of ignorance of good' is, in this respect, emblematic.

It is on this assumption that are based those theoretical models of morality that identify liberation from instincts and passions as the criteria for judging the

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[4] Ivi, p. 3.

correctness of principles and the rightness of conduct. These models follow two main orientations: the utilitarian orientation, according to which an action is right in relation to its consequences, i.e. when its outcome maximises the good for the greatest number of people; and the deontological orientation, according to which an action is right or wrong in reference to given principles, regardless of its consequences.[5]

The profile of the moral subject that emerges from this tradition is that of an individual in constant conflict between the desire to satisfy natural impulses and the limits imposed by socio-cultural conventions: a profile that responds to a 'conflictual' model identifying the moral sense as an ally of reason.

Following this model, much psychological production, until a few decades ago, was based on the idea that moral principles and the judgments derived from them are initially transmitted through socialisation; subsequently refined by social experience, which acts through rewards and punishments, appropriately modulating the sense of right and wrong; finally questioned and redefined thanks to a mature ability to reason about moral dilemmas.

The thought of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, the main figures in moral psychology of the 20th and 21st centuries, follows the rationalist philosophy from Socrates to Kant and delivers to pedagogical theorisation a representation of the moral subject as a being capable of letting the use of reason prevail over the emotional aspects of its experience.

But how would the child go from immaturity to moral maturity?

Beyond the significant differences that run between their respective theories, Piaget and Kohlberg converge in hypothesising that children reach moral maturity gradually, passing through various levels of moral development, which lead them from initial stages of moral indifference to stages of self-interest, and then to stages of concern for the good of others, thanks to an increasing ability to integrate their

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[5] The tendency to derive a set of guiding principles to consider our moral duties, irrespective of content or specific case, is the way of Kant and his categorical imperatives: norms indicative of right action because they are not bound to particular circumstances or content, but are endowed with universal validity.

parents' directives. The sense of 'good' or 'lawful' and 'bad' or 'forbidden' would develop in children because of what their parents tell them to do or not to do and the use of rewards and punishments.[6]

According to Kohlberg, moving from a 'conventional' level - in which the subject has internalised parental directives and is fully aware of its obligations and duties towards society - to a 'post-conventional' level - in which the subject extends its circumscribed vision to include others and to embrace universal ethical principles, disengaged from social norms -, that model of the moral subject of Socratic memory would gradually assert itself in the process of growth.

It is a theory of moral development to which many limitations have now been acknowledged.

According to cognivist neuropsychologist Marc Hauser, recognising that we engage in rational, conscious forms of reasoning is different from accepting that this is the one and only form of mental operation that underlies our moral judgements.[7].

On the other hand, Damasio's studies - starting with the famous case of Phineas Gage, the construction foreman who went from being an exemplary worker and family man to an irreverent and antisocial man after an iron bar had pierced his skull - had revealed that rational capacities were not sufficient to make moral judgements, choices or plans for the future, leading him to hypothesise a close correlation between emotions and reasoning.[8] The lesions found in his patients included crucial areas for the brain in its emotion-processing activity and as a consequence these patients, although absolutely average in terms of IQ, could no longer disentangle themselves from the complex decision-making process that takes place even with regard to ordinary matters.

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[6] Cfr. J. PIAGET, *Il giudizio morale nel fanciullo*, trad. it, Firenze, Giunti, 1972; L. KOHLBERG, *Moral stages ancd moralization: the cognitive-development approach*, in T. LICKONA (ed.), *Moral Development and Behaviour*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.

[7] Cfr. M.D. HAUSER, *Menti morali. Le origini naturali del bene e del male*, trad. it., Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2007 [2006], p. 29.

[8] Cfr. A.R. DAMASIO, *L'errore di Cartesio. Emozione, ragione e cervello umano*, trad. it., Milano, Adelphi, 1995 [1994].

Indeed, a concept of the moral subject consisting solely of the capacities to control emotional impulses, practical reasoning and logical inference is no longer acceptable today.

However, the multiple weaknesses of that concept, if sufficient to declare outdated an educational model aimed only at the cultivation of rational capacities, are not sufficient to exclude the care of those capacities, to the exclusive benefit of others. It is thanks to cognitive activity, in fact, that the subject can arrive at defining his own moral principles to guide him in choosing how to behave in situations of uncertainty: moral principles, meant not so much as impersonal imperatives, but rather as normative teachings that he can autonomously draw from experience.

Multiple experiences that share the same character (a type of experience, for example: humiliation, abuse, instrumentalisation...) can be observed from an external perspective and re-read with a reflexive attitude, becoming aware of the content of 'evil' or injustice that they have in common, and imposing oneself not to re-experience them any more: "Don't allow anyone to treat me like an object!" and, consequently, "Don't treat others like an object!" become principles matured from one's own experience. Not normative impositions imposed from above, therefore, but 'rules' that the subject autonomously gives himself, thanks to his reflective capacity on his emotions, which he submits to the scrutiny of reason.

Meant in this way, moral principles are purged of that intellectualistic and 'disembodied' connotation that Kant had attributed to them, but interact and 'collaborate' with other elements of moral experience that intervene in decision-making processes, such as desires and emotions. In this order of ideas, the rational component remains an important part of the formation of the moral subject, but does not exhaust it.

5. The emotion-based theory of moral development

Opposed to the idea of moral development as the attainment of the capacity for moral reasoning free from passions is the idea that the formation of moral judgements is inseparable from emotional experience.

This is a hypothesis that finds its first formulation in David Hume.

The dynamic governing moral experience, as illustrated by Hume, is thus a three-element dynamic, involving the agent, the recipient and the spectator: vices and virtues motivate the agent to act in a particular way, the agent's actions directly influence the recipient's feelings, and the spectator experiences particular emotions towards the agent and the recipient.[9]

It would be sympathy, therefore, that fosters altruism: prompting us to take others' views into consideration and dissuading us from harming others.

The representation of the moral subject that takes shape in Hume's philosophy is that of an individual capable of adopting moral behaviour and of quickly resolving moral doubts without resorting to reasoning or explicit norms or the dictates of ethical or religious doctrines, but simply following his or her own emotional reactions to an event.

This is a representation of the moral subject that has only recently received renewed attention from psychologist Martin Hoffman, who has explained and illustrated the 'mechanism' that presides over altruistic conduct through the in-depth study of that human capacity that Hume called 'sympathy' and is now called 'empathy'.

Hoffman defines empathy as the activation of psychological processes that cause a person to have feelings that are more congruent with another person's situation than their own. Consequently, by coming into contact, either directly or indirectly, with a person who is suffering, a victim of someone or something, the observer will feel

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[9] D. HUME, *Trattato sulla natura umana*, trad. it., Milano, Bompiani, 2001 [1739], p. 903.

emotions either similar to those of the victim or different but closely related, such as anger, even if the victim is simply sad.[10]

This emotional experience brought about by sharing the other's experience is called *emotional distress* and would be the motivational drive to engage in pro-social behaviour.

The child's first forms of empathy would be mostly automatic and unconscious, often triggered by his or her uncontrollable imitative abilities. With the development of cognitive capacities, not peculiar to moral development, the ability to take on the other's perspective would also mature.

This model of moral development delivers to pedagogical theorisation a profile of the moral subject capable of tuning in to the 'emotional frequencies' of the social context in which the individual finds himself and of responding in a manner that is appropriate and consistent with them.

And yet, Hauser observes in this regard, while it is true that empathy plays an important role in our moral actions, it is equally true that our emotions cannot explain how we judge what is right or wrong, and in particular cannot explain how the child navigates between social norms in general and moral norms in particular.[11]

Cognitivist studies attest that emotions constitute complex systems of responses determined by cognitive processes, on which depend, on the one hand, the formation of certain fundamental parameters of judgement and, on the other hand, the activation of a series of cognitive evaluation systems specific to each emotion[12].

In the onset of each emotion, the intervention of a cognitive evaluation is now recognised. Thus, emotions would be aroused not by direct perception – by the

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[10] Cfr. M. HOFFMAN, *Empathy and Moral Development. Implications for Caring and Justice*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000. It reads: «The key requirement of an empathic response according to my definition is the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation. The empathy-arousing processes often produce the same feeling in observer and victim but not necessarily, as when one feels empathic anger on seeing someone attacked even when the victim feels sad or disappointed rather than angry.» (Ivi, p. 30).

[11] Cfr. M. HAUSER, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[12] Cfr. R. TRENTIN, *Emozioni e processi cognitivi*, in V. D'URSO, R. TRENTIN (a cura di), *Psicologia delle emozioni*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1988, pp. 159-190; L. ANOLLI, *Le emozioni*, Milano, Unicopli, 2002.

'impressions' of which Hume spoke – but by an instantaneous evaluation of what is perceived: a process that, in psychological language, is called appraisal[13].

According to appraisal theory, different emotions are characterised by different evaluative systems. They cannot therefore arise and manifest themselves without some reason and their origin can always be traced back to some form of cognitive appraisal of the situation in the terms in which it is perceived by the subject, with all the links with the subject's own beliefs, expectations, aims and desires. Therefore, emotional experience not only has a cognitive nature, but subjectivity plays a prominent role in it.[14]

Knowing that emotions have a cognitive matrix and not only an instinctual one opens up and legitimises the space that opens up for educational intervention: thinking of them in relation to an object means recognising, through their manifestation, what is of value or, vice versa, what is of no value to the subject; it means recognising and identifying the cause of apparently irrational choices; knowing that they are based on convictions and beliefs makes it possible to work on their truthfulness and groundedness.[15]

Knowledge of the entire cognitive process relating to the emotions leads to the delineation of a concept of the moral subject in which the ability to listen to one's emotions with a view to a moral choice is flanked by the rational capacities that are predominantly exercised in the functions relating to the definition and scrutiny of moral principles and the verification of the veracity of beliefs.

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[13] Cfr. M. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1960.

[14] The two characteristics, that of the cognitive nature and that of the subjective trait of emotion, are also recognised by the philosophical analysis of emotions. Robert Nozick observes that, not only is emotion much more 'cognitive' than one might think, but it is also subjective: different is the belief or evaluation, different is the emotion (Cfr. R. NOZICK, *La vita pensata*, trad. it., Milano, Arnoldo Mondadori, 1990 [1989], p. 92).

[15] On the subject of beliefs, Michel Gazzaniga writes: «Our species can develop beliefs at the speed of light. We create them almost as a reflex. We now know that it is the left hemisphere of the brain, the one that attaches meaning to input from the outside world, that creates them. We also know that the soundness of a belief can be manipulated in many ways: it can be questioned, then followed by a decision; it can be subject to reinforcement or repetition; it can be associated with emotional stimuli or be weakened by competing ideas.» (M. S. GAZZANIGA, *La mente etica*, trad. it., Torino, Codice edizioni, 2006 [2005], p. 147).

But, one has to ask, is that all? Or is there more that intervenes in our moral behaviour?

6. *Moral know-how*

The study of Hume's old sympathy or newly defined empathy now opens up new horizons of knowledge. Over the last two decades, the sciences of the mind have provided many elements for understanding empathy, demonstrating its neural basis, explaining its development and its collapse in situations of psychopathy.[16]

Thanks to such studies, we know that all humans are endowed with a moral faculty: a natural capacity that allows each individual to unconsciously and automatically assess which response to stimuli coming from the context.

The epistemologist Francisco Varela defines this response mechanism as 'know-how', which is triggered by events with a strong emotional impact, such as an accident – which prompts us to offer help –, or the perception of a person's embarrassment on a given topic - which prompts us to change the subject with a humorous joke.[17]

It frequently happens, Varela adds, that we contrast this type of instinctive moral behaviour with situations in which we feel we are the ones who decide, by virtue of reflections and reasoning that lead us to voluntary deliberations. And yet, although part of our moral behaviour derives from such judgements, «we cannot, and should not, disregard the first, more widespread mode of ethical behaviour merely because it is not 'reflexive'».[18]

Neuroscience, through experiments using neuroimaging techniques, confirms the existence of this know-how in the human mind.

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[16] Starting with Giacomo Rizzolatti's and Vittorio Gallese's studies on mirror-neurons, neuroscientific research has shown how inherent in human beings is the capacity to recognise the other-as-us and us-as-the-other, thus laying the foundations for a theory of human nature as one 'made' for relationship. Cfr. G. RIZZOLATTI, C. SINIGAGLIA, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2006.

[17] Cfr. F.J. VARELA, *Un know-how per l'etica*, trad. it., Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1992.

[18] Ivi, p. 8.

7. The hypothesis of a universal moral grammar

It was the linguist Noam Chomsky and the political philosopher John Rawls who first put forward the hypothesis that there are profound similarities between language and morality, relating to our innate competence in these two areas.

As is well known, Chomsky had posed the question of how it was possible for children to learn their mother tongue so quickly and easily, even though they were not instructed in its rules and despite the fact that the stimuli available to them to eventually 'reconstruct' those rules on their own were extremely poor and fragmentary.

Hence the hypothesis of an innate body of knowledge that has taken the name 'Universal Grammar'. Assuming the existence of a Universal Grammar serves to account for the way in which human beings acquire language and describes the initial, genetically determined state of the linguistic faculty, i.e. the biological matrix thanks to which children would acquire linguistic competence in their mother tongue.[19]

Inspired by Chomsky, Rawls asserts that a moral grammar exists in our minds that would allow us to quickly learn the moral norms of a given culture and would be activated whenever we find ourselves in the situation of having to categorise an action in terms of 'permissible', 'obligatory' or 'forbidden', without requiring the involvement of higher mental processes, or the control of consciousness or explicit reference to underlying moral principles.[20]

From a pedagogical point of view, this hypothesis explains both how in each culture moral capacity is one of the building blocks of social coexistence and why it is so difficult to understand the moral behaviour of individuals belonging to other

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[19] N. CHOMSKY, *Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures*, Cambridge, MA MIT Press, 1987. It reads: «The acquisition of a specific moral and ethical system, wide ranging and often precise in its consequences, cannot simply be the result of 'shaping' and 'control' by the social environment. As in the case of language, the environment is far too impoverished and indeterminate to provide this system to the child, in its full richness and applicability. […] it certainly seems reasonable to speculate that the moral and ethical system acquired by the child owes much to some innate faculty.» (Ivi, pp. 152-153).

[20] Cfr. J. RAWLS, *Una teoria della giustizia,* trad. it., Milano, Feltrinelli, 2008 [1995], p. 58.

cultures, in the same way that it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand a speaker of another language if one does not know it.

8.Conclusions

The hypothesis of the existence of a universal moral grammar, together with other proven knowledge on moral development, is of great interest in the field of pedagogical research and design for several reasons.

Firstly, it directs and guides educational intervention, since it identifies a biologically defined area of capacity, open therefore to the development of possible functioning on which educational action can act.

Secondly, the fact that such a grammar is not only open to the development of different moral codes, but also allows for the learning of their functioning, makes it possible to identify a specific educational task: that of developing capacities for moral understanding that are not ethnocentric – i.e. limited to culturally determined moral categories – but ethnorelative – i.e. capable of ensuring the subject's 'displacement' from its own moral categories to those of others.

Finally, the capacity to shift from one moral code to another also enables the subject to acquire the capacity to shift those evaluative processes that preside over the onset of an emotion – the processes of appraisal – to be effectively able to place oneself 'in the other's shoes'.

All this makes it possible to gradually extend that motivational drive to moral action – empathy – to the 'anyone' other than the self.

It often happens, in fact, that prejudices and unverified beliefs against those who are different (by ethnicity, religion, faith, sexual orientation, etc.) reduce empathy to a 'sympathy' reserved exclusively for one's fellow human being.

If neuroscientific studies confirm that it is from empathy that moral capacity develops, it is by nurturing, cultivating and exercising this capacity for cognitive

functioning, aimed at questioning beliefs and revising principles, that empathy will be free to mature and express itself in a pro-social sense.

On these bases, an effective educational path to overcome bullying behaviour can be structured.